

12 The Bush Train to Dar es Salaam

'Any guns?' the Tanzanian customs inspector asked me in the little shed in Mwanza, poking my bag. Never mind his dirty clothes, you guessed he was an official from all the ballpoints leaking ink in his shirt pocket.

Though there was a pie slice of Tanzania lying in Lake Victoria, the southern shore of the lake was the enforceable border.

'No guns.'

'You can go.'

I walked through the crowd of people who were welcoming the ferry – the ferry's irregular arrival being one of the highlights of life in Mwanza. Walking towards town I could understand why. The place was derelict, just ruined and empty shops and an unpaved main street that was almost impassable because of its terrible condition. Old buses swayed, almost toppling as their wheels descended into deep potholes. This was another haunted border post, a dismal and interesting one, that the safari-going tourists who flew into the international airport at Arusha would never see, though they would see some wild animals and colorful natives.

In Mwanza, the natives were not colorful, just numerous and ragged, and so many of them had attached themselves to me that when a taxi came by I flagged it down and got in.

'What day does the train go to Dar es Salaam?' I asked.

'Today night,' the driver said.

'What time?'

'Maybe one hour.'

We went down the lumpy road to the railway station, which was crowded with food sellers and people carrying plastic-wrapped bales of their belongings. This bustle looked odd, the dressed-up people, some of them running, for it was drama in a place where drama and urgency were in short supply.

I roused the stationmaster, who was eating peanuts in his office with the peanut seller, a crouching woman holding a big tin tray of them.

'Is it too late to get a ticket on this train?'

'We have space for you, *bwana*,' he said.

He went to get me a ticket, and the peanut seller shook her tray of peanuts and said, 'Njugu? Njugu?'

Within an hour of arriving in Mwanza, *Farewell, old man!* still ringing in my ears, I was on the train, in a little two-berth compartment but apparently alone, with bottles of water from the drink seller who hawked them by the track.

'Are you comfortable?' the stationmaster said, stopping by my compartment to solicit a tip.

'Yes, thank you,' I said, handing him some unearned income. 'When will we get to Dar?'

'Sometime on Sunday,' he said, and went on his way.

It was now Friday night, but so what? I had a berth and a window on Africa, in a railway car full of Africans. In a short time we would be in the bush, traveling east through the middle of Tanzania.

Because of the bright lights of the station yard, people were attracted to the place, and they sat and chatted. A large gathering of children were kicking a football under the lights. It wasn't a proper game, but it was such hearty playing, with laughter and shouts, that it held my attention. Africa was full of skinny energetic children, shrieking as they played, and the game usually involved kicking a ball. These children did not have a round rubber ball but rather a misshapen cloth ball stuffed with rags. The field was not flat, not smooth – it was a succession of dirt piles and humps, very stony. The children played barefoot, probably twenty or more, not teams but a free-for-all.

Watching them play and call to each other on this hot night, raising dust in the lights of the station yard, I was impressed by their exertion and heartened by their high spirits. The playing field was a wasteland, and part of it lay in darkness. The children ran in and out of the shadows, screeching. The dark didn't matter, the bumpy field didn't matter, nor did the squashed ball. By any reckoning, these children were playing and laughing in one of the more desperate provinces of

a semi-derelict country. Even after the engine whistle blew and we started to draw out of Mwanza I still heard their tinkling laughter and then I remembered why I had been so fascinated by this happy sight, which made me feel so lonely.

I was reminded of the end of Saki's novel, *The Unbearable Bassington*, where there is just such a scene – children playing excitedly, observed by a solitary man, Comus Bassington. That setting was Africa, too, a place much like Mwanza, a 'heat-blistered, fever-scourged wilderness, where men lived like groundbait and died like flies. Demons one might believe in, if one did not hold one's imagination in healthy check, but a kindly all-managing God, never.'

Bassington is so lonely and miserable he cannot bear to look upon the happy scene.

Those wild young human kittens represented the joy of life; he was the outsider, the lonely alien, watching something in which he could not join, a happiness in which he had no part or lot . . . [and] . . . in his unutterable loneliness he bowed his head on his arms, that he might not see this joyous scrambling frolic on yonder hillside.

There was enough moon for me to see that the landscape outside Mwanza was as bouldery as the lakeshore. But this was a flat plain with interruptions of boulder piles, some as high as hills, others as smooth as burial mounds.

The villages were no more than mud huts with oil lamps flickering inside – but for all their simplicity they had a wholeness that was lacking in Uganda's villages. The villages of Uganda showed signs of having been attacked, abandoned, repossessed, rebuilt, improved, and battered again, the result of war, expulsion, violent change. Its battle scars made Uganda seem a strong country. In Tanzania there was no such graphic evidence of the past, but just decline – simple linear decrepitude, and in some villages collapse.

Very quickly – twenty miles or less – and we were in the bush: the grassy plains, with low trees, the great African emptiness, as empty as Lake Victoria had looked, and just as ocean-like under the watery glow of the moon.

When clouds covered the moon I looked around the train and found a dining car and some Africans inside already drunk. The attendant asked me in Swahili if I was hungry and to tempt me he showed me some heaped plates, saying, '*Chakula, chakula*,' food, food.

To the novice this was 'mystery meat.' But I knew better. One dish was obviously a purple amlongus pie, the others were a stack of crumbobblous cutlets and some goskypatties, all of which I recognized from *The Book of Nonsense Cookery* by Edward Lear. The cutlets were done to perfection, the recipe having been closely followed ('When the whole is thus minced, brush it up hastily with a new clothes brush'). The attendant was still waving them in my face, yet I declined. 'Just a beer,' I said.

I took it back to my compartment. On the way I spotted two aliens, the only other ones on the train. They were pale and blotchy and sunburned, a young man, a young woman, probably in their twenties though their bulk made them seem older. They were, it turned out, the sort of podgy, cookie-munching, Christ-bitten evangelists who pop up in places like Mwanza with nothing but a Bible and a rucksack and the requisite provisions: cookies and cake and a hymn book in Swahili. I discovered this because the train windows were open for any available breeze and once when the train slowed down I heard my name. Paul.

Good God, had they seen me? Were they going to mention that their parents liked my books and what an amazing coincidence it was that they were meeting me on a train?

No, for the man was saying in a pedantic way, his mouth filled with cookies, 'Paul tells us in Galatians . . .'

The sky at the western horizon began to glow in slow explosions of lightning. The bursts of light widened from the ground up on a jagged stalk of fire, traveling into clouds that swelled hugely as they were illuminated, going from black to bright. The light was more sudden than fireworks, closer in violence and scale to a big battle – one in which the bombers and combatants were too small to see, though their bombs were overwhelmingly hot and destructive. It was an African thunderstorm twenty or thirty miles away. Now and then the whole sky of blackish clouds was convulsed by a bolt of lightning

that lingered as a penetrating flash. In that flash I could see the land clearly – could see that it was empty, the storm doing nothing but showing it as empty and indestructible.

'Another direction he gives in Galatians,' the man was saying again, and the sky was foaming with fire, and just a chuckle of thunder, the storm was so distant.

Look for the truth in nature, I wanted to say to those cookie-eating missionaries in the next compartment: Nothing is complete, everything is imperfect, nothing lasts. Go to bed.

Before dawn we arrived at the town of Tabora. We were still there three hours later. The missionaries had left the train, most people had left the train, but in the meantime the train had filled up with new passengers. An African joined me in my compartment, assigned to the upper berth.

The train was the only practical way in or out of Tabora. The railway was the link between this good-sized if ruinous town and the capital, 800 miles away. Decades of neglect had left Tanzania's roads in a terrible state, many of them unusable. The exceptions, as always, were the tourist routes. A safari geek wearing whipcord jodhpurs and a pith helmet, jogging along in a Land-Rover on the way to Ngorongoro Crater to gape at warthogs might marvel at Tanzania's modernity – great hotels, excellent roads, robust wildlife. But a Sukuma fisherman intending to sell his catch down the line in Shinyanga, just sixty miles away, would be hard pressed to find a passable road, much less a vehicle, and his attainment of Tabora was out of the question, except on this bush train.

Tanzania had reached a dead end on the socialist path, and as an economic failure, both in industry and agriculture, the country was advertising itself as a superior collection of game parks, inviting foreigners to take pictures of its endangered species and to spend money. Great tracts of bush on a principal migratory route for game, at Loliondo, near the Kenyan border, had been leased to a nob in the United Arab Emirates to use as a private unregulated hunting reserve for the very rich who wanted to kill leopards. The locals, Masai warriors, were guides and scrubbers in the game lodge, who resented

the intrusion and claimed that when the game was thin in Loliondo the hunters shot animals in Serengeti National Park.

Tanzania was a tourist destination. The comrades, the Maoists, the ideologues, the revolutionaries, the sloganeering Fidelistas, were now hustling for jobs in hotels and taking tourists for game drives. And if as a Tanzanian your village was not near any lions or elephants – and Tabora wasn't – you were out of luck, and had to put up with crummy schools and bad roads and this amazingly casual railway, once called the Central Line, which had been built almost a hundred years ago by the Germans.

The man in the upper berth introduced himself as Julius, named after the father of his country. He was an educated man in his mid-forties, well spoken and considerate – he always left the compartment to smoke cigarettes, for example. He worked for the Land Use Department, in agriculture, helping farmers make money by growing viable crops. This was a serious subject in Tabora. He was going to a staff meeting in Dar es Salaam next week, leaving home a week early to be sure of being in Dar on time.

'The local cash crop is tobacco for cigarettes,' Julius said. 'There was once a tobacco cooperative. The government bought the crop, the price was all right.'

'So what happened?'

'The managers were corrupt. They mismanaged the cooperatives. The cooperatives failed, so the industries were privatized.'

He spoke without any passion, in a chastened, almost defeated tone. Dogmatic motto-chanting Tanzania had been humbled. No one talked of imperialism and neo-colonialism now, nor the evils of capitalism – though they could have, for even capitalism had failed in Tanzania.

'In Tabora there are many small tobacco farms – an acre or half an acre,' Julius said. 'Two years ago private companies bought the crop. The prices were good for flue-cured tobacco. But this year the price is one quarter of what it was. The farmers – well, we call them peasants – they are struggling. They can't make ends meet.'

I said, 'In Kenya the coffee growers are planting maize.'

'Here too,' Julius said. 'Many have turned to just growing food for themselves – maize and beans and onions.'

After all this time, the return to subsistence farming. This way of life in Africa was familiar to me. The strong impression I had was not that the places I knew were worse off but that they had not changed at all. After forty years of experimenting with various ideologies and industries they were back to farming by hand and pounding maize into flour, living on porridge and beans. Nothing was new except that there were many more people, grubbier buildings, more litter, fewer trees, more poachers, less game.

In the long delay I got off the train and looked around Tabora. The shelves in the shops were bare, though there was produce in the market – women selling bananas and tomatoes and bunches of dusty onions.

We finally left Tabora in mid-morning in the heat and headed into green wooded bush, of flirting birds and emptiness. It was so little changed from the old unexplored Africa of the nineteenth century. Burton and Speke who had walked through here from the coast 150 years ago would easily have recognized it. It was the Arab trade route, the slave route.

Julius said to me, 'Why don't you go to Arusha and see the animals – lions and elephants?'

That was what visitors did, flying into the international airport that had been built for their convenience, near the animals. But the vast country had no connection with that and was in a sense still undeveloped, even undiscovered. The irony was that Arusha in 1967 was the site of the national assertion of self-determination, an eloquent oration by the president that Tanzania would be self-sufficient. This so-called Arusha Declaration pledged that the government would eradicate 'all types of exploitation' so as to 'prevent the accumulation of wealth which is inconsistent with the existence of a classless society.' Now the question – here and elsewhere – was not exploitation or class or wealth but how to get a meal.

Zimbabwe was in the radio news – white farms being invaded by Africans demanding land. President Mugabe was siding with the Africans who were breaking the laws of trespass, as well as in some cases murdering the white farmers. I shared this news with Julius.

'Mugabe wants to last a few more years,' Julius said. 'So he makes

speeches about land. Yes, they will take that land away from those white farmers. It happened here in Tanzania. Some land will go to rich Africans. The rest will be subdivided among the peasants – small plots. They will grow whatever they want, and they will end up where we are now, just peasants struggling on small farms, growing maize and beans to feed their families.'

I often heard pitiless assessments like this from Africans on trains or people in villages, but never such trenchant good sense from African politicians or from foreign agents of virtue either.

Because of the season and this equatorial spot at noon the sun was directly overhead. We stopped at the station of Kazi-Kazi, just a tin-roofed shed. The dense bush lay all around, the head-high grass, and bunches of yellow wild flowers. Beyond this was an immense flat plain.

The starkness of it all was a wonder. I had come this way in the 1960s and even then had probably seen the old station, the rusty roof, the posts and pylons, the tree clumps, the bales of thorn branches used as a fence, the twiggy whips like barbed wire. This halt could not have changed in forty years, nor even since the railway was built – 100 years. But if it was not improved neither was it seriously deteriorated. Farther down the line, at the halt at Kilaraka, a small boy hurried down the dusty path from a cluster of mud huts carrying a bowl of boiled eggs, hoping to sell some for a few pennies to the passengers. Just as he reached the train the whistle blew and we were on our way, leaving him howling.

We were crossing the Wagogo Plains, the wild heart of Tanzania: no roads, no towns, only this railway. What animals existed here were hunted – poached for food by the Wagogo, who were pastoralists. Had they been as colorful as the Masai whom they somewhat resembled in their carlobe plugs and lethal-looking spears, more attention might have been paid to them. They sharpened their front teeth into points, and they wore beads, but still no one paid them any heed. They might have prospered on their own. But because of drought, dead animals and neglect, they were about as well off as they were when Sir Richard Burton passed through in the 1850s. He had stopped briefly to investigate the Wagogo's sexual habits, with his customary thoroughness, questioning the women, measuring the men. The women were

'well disposed towards strangers with fair complexions,' and one man, 'when quiescent, numbered nearly six inches.'

The Rift Valley lay ahead, a visible dip in the great green plain, shallower and less dramatic than in Kenya, but more wooded, forested in places, another sight of old Africa and its seemingly limitless savanna. By the tracks were purple wild flowers and darting swallows, and in the distance just bush. At great intervals there would be the sort of specimen tree – a mango or a baobab – that indicated a Wagogo village. But the villages were hardly that – no more than five huts in a circle, just the number that could fit in the shade of those few trees.

There were Wagogo at all the small stations, at Igigi and Saranda, some begging, others hawking food and artifacts. They smiled, showing their sharpened teeth, and since I was the only *mzungu* on this train they clustered around my car, offering carved wooden mortars and pestles, woven reed mats, paddles and wooden spoons and baskets; cooked food, too – chicken and flyblown fish.

The afternoon heat was in the nineties: the sun burning in a cloudless sky. This was something of a disappointment to the local people who needed rain for their newly planted maize. So the sunshine was like a blight – people tried to hide from it, but it was not easy.

At one small halt in this great sunbaked emptiness only one tree grew, a mango tree of modest size, but leafy with dense boughs. There was a circle of shade beneath it. Within that circle were thirty people, pressed against each other to keep in the shade, watched by a miserable goat tethered in the sunshine. What looked like a group game was obviously an afternoon routine of survival. As interesting to me as this packed-together mob of villagers around the one tree trunk was the idea that no one in this hot exposed place had thought to plant another mango tree, or even more for the shade they offered. It was simple enough to plant a tree, this mango itself contained a thousand seeds, yet no one had planted one, or if they had the tree had been cut down. The sight of the Africans in this tiny place in Central Tanzania struggling to keep within the patch of shade stayed with me as a vivid instance of forward planning, or rather the lack of it.

Beyond this halt were the sort of boulders I had seen near Mwanza, but even bigger and gray toned and rounded, looking from a distance

like a herd of elephants, great gray elephant-arsed boulders, so many of them browsing on a hillside that they obscured the hills: hills like gray elephants.

The only signs of humans were the wrecked and twisted railway cars tipped off the track with some rusty rails from some long-ago train wreck. I was rereading *Heart of Darkness* and was reminded of this when I read,

I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass . . . and . . . an undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails.

Broken or scuttled machinery by the roadside is a common sight in Africa. Not one to lament, not any longer, anyway for me.

One of the themes in *Heart of Darkness* – harped on rather than suggested – was cannibalism. Africans are casually referred to as 'cannibals,' by Marlow. Even Kurtz the idealist-turned-bogeyman had developed a taste for human flesh and kept human skulls as household accessories, which is reason enough for his last words to be 'The horror! The horror!' The heavy hints of anthropophagy are a bit of stage managing on Conrad's part. Though mutilation and amputation and massacre by Belgians had been customary, cannibalism had never been institutionalized by Africans in the Congo (as it had been in, say, Fiji). The suggestion of flesh eating was just another racist dig, like that of the Toronto mayor refusing to go to Kenya, 'because I don't want to end up in a cooking pot.' There are similar gibes in *Heart of Darkness*.

But much more prosaically observed in the book, and so more horrible, were the unsensational examples of ruin and exploitation – roads leading nowhere, collapsed huts, pointless effort, broken machinery, rusty metal. Details like these that, intended to appall the reader in 1902, were now the simple facts of everyday life in Africa, a century later. Long ago I might have said that such ruin represented failed hopes, but now I knew they were not African hopes.

This railway line, built by the Germans, linked Dar to Kigoma on

Lake Tanganyika. The idea, like most colonial ideas, was to plunder the country more efficiently. The British had built the spur to Mwanza. Since then not a single foot of track had been added and no improvements had been made. Dodoma, where we arrived in the early evening, was a good example of the colonial period being the high water mark of railway technology in central Tanzania. The station was a hundred years old and, though ramshackle, still functioning.

Never mind, Dodoma (like Tabora and Dila, Marsabit and Nanyuki) was the sort of place I could have lived in quite happily – doing something worthy, of course, like teaching in the local school or getting the local people as interested in bee keeping as their ancestors had been (another forgotten skill in East Africa). People would say of me, in a praising way, as they always said of such people: 'He devoted his life to Africa!' But that was not it at all, for it was just a version of Rimbaud in Harar: the exile, a selfish beast with modest fantasies of power, secretly enjoying a life of beer drinking and scribbling and occasional mythomania in a nice climate where there were no interruptions, such as unwelcome letters or faxes or cell phones. It was an eccentric ideal, life lived off the map.

Dodoma was also where the east-west railway crossed the Great North Road, which penetrated the Masai Steppe. But if the railway was in poor shape, this major highway was much worse, a road to avoid for its bad surface and its potholes and, in this season, its mud. Black clouds were gathering around Dodoma, teasing its farmers with thunder, bolts of lightning exploding inside the dark clouds and illuminating them for seconds, making them seem blacker.

Seeing me scribbling, Julius said, 'What are you writing?'

'Just a report,' I said.

He would understand that; he would not understand that I was writing an erotic story that was becoming a novella in my notebook.

When I was not doing that I was staring out of the window, making notes, listening to the radio. I bought bananas and boiled eggs from hawkers by the tracks, and sometimes risked the crumbobblous cutlers in the dining car. If the train stopped for a period of time I got out and paced and bought a coconut. I had spent some time talking to the

station master at Dodoma, who was doing his best with antiquated switching machinery.

Later in the day I discovered that Julius had been summoned from our compartment to deal with a drama.

'It was very bad,' he said.

'What's the story?'

He did not say anything at first. There was another commotion in the passageway leading down the sleeping car. A group of big boys slouched past, followed by the stern conductor. The boys were the ragged drunken youths I had seen in the dining car – the reason I usually stayed away from the dining car.

'Those three boys,' Julius said, lowering his voice. 'They trapped a girl in the toilet. She went in and when she tried to come out they entered and trapped her.'

'What did they want?'

'They were going to rape her, but she screamed and someone heard. They called me because I know her. She was very worried – she is still worried. I will tell the police.'

I expected more trouble, but there was no fuss, there was silence, a conspicuous silence. And around midnight we came to a dead stop. Instead of entering Morogoro, the next-to-last town on the line, we halted at the little town of Kimamba and moved no farther. We were still there seven hours later in the hot, humid morning in sticky air that was filled with mosquitoes.

I heard the word *shauri* mumbled – meaning a problem, a fuss. Then someone said in the corridor, 'A derailment.'

The townsfolk of Kimamba gathered on the embankment to stare at the stopped train. Though it was an unscheduled stop, some enterprising people sold bananas and tea, but most just gaped. From a distant mosque a muezzin began wailing.

Beneath distressed façades on the main street of abandoned shops I could read faded signs, one about tractors, another saying *New Planters Hotel*. After peering at Kimamba for a long while it was possible to see that it had once been a real town, possibly important, with something resembling a local economy. It was now like an ancient ruin.

Julius, the expert in land use, said, 'They used to grow sisal here.'

Sisal was the vital fiber in all the rope in the world, until nylon came along. Julius explained that sisal had been grown here by European and Indian planters in large estates. There were no smallholders. Sisal production peaked in Tanzania in the mid-1960s and in this boom the estates were nationalized by the government eager to cash in on the boom. The expatriate planters were booted out of the country. Then the bottom fell out of the sisal market. Production dropped to a quarter of what it had been, and in the nineties it was less than one-tenth. At this point the government cut its losses and sold the sisal estates off to private individuals. Sisal growing was back to where it had been forty years earlier, except that the market for it hardly existed anymore. Terrible Tanzanian economics once again.

Sisal growing was not very difficult. The plant can endure drought and heavy rain and poor husbandry. It was troubled by few pests and diseases and was fireproof except after repeated burnings. It could be inter-cropped with other food crops. It was a wonderful cash crop and still grown in Brazil, Mexico, China and the Philippines, by smallholders. But – no one knew why – it had been a failure in Tanzania.

'Maybe bad management,' Julius said. 'The people are just growing food for themselves.'

I said, 'That's not a bad idea, is it? If they had been growing sisal they would have used the money to buy food.'

But the people would survive. In such circumstances it was the government that was left in the lurch, with no income, no exports, no hard currency.

I sat by the tracks and listened to the radio: foot and mouth disease was destroying British cattle; there was war in Macedonia, death in Chechnya, Borneo, Israel and Afghanistan; Wall Street was recording steeply declining figures, and 'Tech stocks are in retreat.'

Kimamba was hot, dirty, and poor. But it was able to feed itself. And it was seizing an opportunity today with the stopped train, selling the passengers food and drinks.

Seeing me, a young boy with a big tin teapot, hot milk and tea cups stopped by.

'Good morning, sah.'

'What's your name?'

'My name is Wycliffe.'

'What's the problem, Wycliffe?'

'The problem, sah, it is money.'

As the hours passed we made a mess of our portion of track in Kimamba. The toilets were dumping sewage on to the ground, passengers were tossing banana peels and waste paper and tin cans and plastic bottles out the windows. Along with this littering was loudness: the rap music that was played now and then in the dining car was being played now. The Kimamba folk came closer to listen.

Drunken Africans in the train became boisterous. This I did not like at all.

Looking for information about the derailment, I ran into an African named Weston who said he was an accountant. He was going to Dar es Salaam to conduct an audit of someone's books. He said that Tanzania was in a bad way.

'We are poorer than Malawi. We have no economy. We have nothing,' he said. 'But it was worse before "liberalization."'

Liberalization was when the Tanzanian government dumped all the money-losing industries, selling them to the private sector. Now they had more or less what they had had before independence: creaky trains, simple agriculture, and a certain number of lions and elephants and quite a few gnus.

Many blasts on the whistle shattered the silence in Kimamba and cut through the rap music. A few more blasts, and passengers leaped aboard and we left Kimamba around noon-time, just as abruptly as we had stopped there in the middle of the night.

We rattled into a wilderness of stunted trees and flat plains and absolutely no people. Settlements such as Kimamba were like flat little islands in a green sea. A few hours later we were among green hills, the hills like high islands in the same sea. The town of Morogoro was in those hills. I wanted to stop here, because it was a road junction: I could go south from here and avoid the urban sprawl of Dar es Salaam. But I had a problem. Because the immigration office had been closed

in Mwanza the official had given me a four-day visa. I could buy a visa extension only in Dar, and would have to do it tomorrow.

After all the thunder and the portents of rain en route, the weather finally hit as we approached the coast. We were in a hot, wet flatland of boggy earth and even boggier rice fields. The planting season had just begun here, with the onset of the rains.

Julius joined me at the window.

I remembered something I had wanted to ask him. 'Ever heard of Kwanza?'

'As you know it means "first,"' he said, pronouncing it *fast*.

'Yes. But I am thinking of Kwanza, the festival.'

'There is no festival. *Kwanza* means first.' He rapped the wall of the coach. '*Gari a kwanza*.'

'First Class carriage,' I said.

'That is correct.'

But it was a euphemism. Almost three days out of Mwanza the train was very grubby. The staff cleaned all sinks with strong disinfectant, knowing that most of the men lazily used the sinks in their compartments as urinals. Eaters washed their hands with a pitcher and basin, the waiter handing over a crumb of soap. But you couldn't bathe. No showers made this hot train reek with the smell of unwashed humanity. The toilets were vile. The dining car was filthy, not that there was any food after such delays. I liked riding this train because it crossed a part of Tanzania where roads were impassable. A little activity with a broom, a mop, a scrubbing brush, and the trip would have been agreeable. Delays did not seriously bother me. I had no deadline, nor anyone to meet me. But the dirt, the litter, the shit, and the drunks made this side of travel in Africa hard to bear.

Perhaps it was remarkable that the train ran at all. But how else, except for flying, would this thousand or so Tanzanians be able to travel from Mwanza or Tabora? The train was a necessity. The pressure of numbers and very poor maintenance made smooth running impossible, but there was no excuse for the filth.

The low steep hills indicated we were near the coast. In the hillsides were sharply defined cave entrances.

'Kaolin,' Julius said. 'The hills were a source of the stuff, the caves --

he said -- dated from German times. At one time it was a Tanzanian export. Roofing tiles and bricks and pots were made from this useful clay. 'But these days people sneak in and steal it.'

Another defunct industry, like the sisal and the tobacco and the rice and the cotton and the apiaries in Tabora, started by some Peace Corps Volunteers, that had produced high-quality honey. The volunteers had gone home.

'What happened to the bee hives after that?'

'They just failed.'

Dar es Salaam started miles from the coast, with scrappy rice fields and scattered villages and mud houses with pretensions, the buildings closer and closer together. Cement block houses, square one-story affairs, continued, became linked, in an outer shanty town, just poor sheds and too many people, jammed together, everything sitting in puddles.

Yet life went on. In the middle of this muddy slum, in the drizzling rain, a man was propped up, washing his feet with a bucket and a scrubbing brush. People were hacking at the earth with mattocks, preparing a small plot for planting. Some women were stirring soot-blackened pots on smoky fires -- cooking outdoors in the rain. Some maize stalks were sprouting by the track, someone's garden. The passing scene began to resemble a slum picture by Hogarth, even down to the Hogarthian details -- people drinking and fighting, sitting around, emptying chamber-pots, a man pissing against a post, a child crying, no one even looking up. At one level crossing an over-excited boy was jumping up and down in a mud puddle and screaming at the train.

I was in no hurry -- I wasn't due anywhere -- yet whenever I arrived in an African city I wanted to leave.

Urban life is nasty all over the world, but it is nastiest in Africa -- better a year in Tabora than a day in Nairobi. None of the African cities I had so far seen, from Cairo southward, seemed fit for human habitation, though there was never a shortage of foreigners to sing the praises of these snake pits -- how you could use mobile phones, and send faxes, and log on to the Internet, and buy pizzas, and call home -- naming the very things I wanted to avoid.

One day, in an African newspaper I read: *In the year 2005, 75 percent of the people in Africa will be living in urban areas.* This was only a few years off. It made me glad I was taking my trip now, because African cities became more awful – more desperate and dangerous – as they grew larger. They did not become denser, they simply sprawled more, became gigantic villages. In such cities, women still lugged water from standpipes and cooked over wood fires and washed clothes in filthy creeks and people shat in open latrines. 'Citified' in Africa just meant bigger and dirtier.

Like the person so poor and downtrodden who loses self-respect and any sense of shame, the African cities did not even pretend to be anything except large slums. Once, each city had a distinct look: Nairobi had a stucco and tile-roof style of architecture, Kampala had its harmonious hills, Dar es Salaam was coastal colonial, with thick-walled buildings designed to be cool in the heat. Such style gave the city atmosphere and an appearance of order in which hope was not wholly absent.

Now, one city was much like another, because a slum is a slum. Improvisation had taken the place of planning. Cheap new buildings were put up because the older buildings were regarded as too expensive to renovate. And because no building was properly maintained every structure in an African city was in a state of deterioration. I had a list of Dar es Salaam hotels I might stay in. I mentioned one to a taxi driver. He said, 'Finished.' I said another name. 'Bunt by fire.' Another: 'Shenzi' (dirty). Another: 'Closed down. Not wucking.'

Tanzanians began most assertions with, 'The problem, you see . . .'. To any observation or chance remark, Tanzanians I met would start by apportioning blame. Yet they had had a fairly peaceful time of it – no war, no revolution, no *coups d'état*, no martial law. Once or twice in forty years Tanzanians had even voted in free elections.

You could not spend a more wasted day than in an office of the Tanzanian government, as I discovered one day in Dar es Salaam. This waste of time suggested what might be wrong. Tanzanians complained of unemployment – in the capital almost half the adults had no jobs. But those with jobs did next to nothing, if the Office of Immigration was anything to go by. I had my passport, my fifty US dollars in cash,

my filled-out application for a tourist visa, and I stood the requisite hour in line. I was no one special. Everyone else in line was encountering the same obstacles in the open-plan office of twenty employees: apathy, then rudeness and finally hostility.

The mob I was among just watched and waited. The office was dirty, the desks messy, one civil servant was eating a hunk of cake, another one, a woman with curlers in her hair, was reading the morning paper at her desk, yet another staring into space, a man simply drumming his fingers. I tried to detach my personal urgency from this charade (in fact I needed this visa and my passport to buy a train ticket) and watched as though it was a comic documentary. 'You come back later,' the surly woman said. But I wanted to monitor my application proceeding through all the stages, moving from desk to desk, getting cake crumbs on it from the gobbling man, tea stains from the fingers of the cup sipper. Six people examined and initialed my form. And then my form was put in a tray, where it remained for twenty minutes. It was then handed through a slot in the wall, a side office.

If I had complained they would have replied, with justification, 'What's the hurry?' 'Who are you?' 'What does it matter?' 'Why should we care?' Nothing had ever worked in Tanzania, all they had ever known was failure, empty political rhetoric, broken promises. True, the unemployed in Dar es Salaam looked desperate, but the workers too looked cheated, envious and angry.

Following my passport, I sneaked to the side office door and opened it, apologizing – pretending to have entered the wrong office – and saw the African visa officer in a white shirt and blue necktie with a tin tray on his desk, a hunk of bread in his hand, tucking into a big bowl of meat stew, slopping gobs of gravy on the stack of visa forms.

'Sorry,' I said, and hurried outside to laugh.

There I found Christopher Njau. He was twenty-two, university educated, unemployed, trying to get a passport.

'The problem, you see,' he began, as soon as I remarked that I had spent two and a half hours and fifty dollars to wait for a tourist visa – this in a country that was begging tourists to visit.

'The World Bank won't give us money,' Njau said.

'I don't see the connection between this inefficient office and a World Bank loan.'

'Also, there is too much of corruption here.'

'Should I have offered a bribe?'

He shrugged. 'Nationalizing the banks was a mistake. Also, we have overpopulation.'

'So what's the answer?'

'I want to leave,' he said. 'That's why I am here. I need a passport to leave – but already it has been months.'

'Where would you like to go?'

'My sister is in Texas. She is studying. She has her own car! With a car she can drive to work and also study.'

He shook his head in disbelief. It seemed almost unimaginable that his sister, a woman of twenty-four, would own a car. I found it much harder to imagine that she had actually been to this office and gotten a passport.

Later that day I picked up my visa and bought my train ticket. The ordinary train ticket from Dar es Salaam to the middle of Zambia was twenty dollars, First Class was fifty-five. In First Class you shared a compartment with three other people – not my idea of First Class, but it would do.

With time to kill I took the ferry to Zanzibar. Zanzibar remained mostly intact, an island smelling of cloves, its whitewashed houses fronted with decorated parapets and screened verandas. But there were apartment blocks too, as ugly as anything in Romania – and perhaps built by the Romanians – one of Tanzania's earlier well wishers.

There were dhows at the Zanzibar waterfront, and boats, and traders, stall holders, fruit sellers, with the usual medieval touch, on this day a boy about to walk along a high rope strung between two trees. He had attracted fifty or sixty spectators, Zanzibari boys with nothing to do but be entertained by the patter of the acrobat's build-up – he made much of the fact that he had no safety net.

'I might fall! I might die!'

So dazzling white as it loomed from the sea, Zanzibar was an island of smelly alleys and sulky Muslims. I looked around the bazaar and found a grouchy Indian merchant.

'Business is down.'

'When was it up?'

'Sixty-something.'

'How much are these sandals?'

'They were stiff, antique, made of silver. They were a bride's silver slippers, to be worn on the wedding night, as she went scuff-scuff in the semi-darkness to the bed where her groom awaited his triumph, her defloration.'

'I must weigh them.'

I laughed at the thought that these pretty objects were being sold by their weight.

'Silver is two-twenty a gram,' he said, naming a price in shillings.

I calculated the price to be \$120. We haggled for a while and then I gave him 100 in cash and he wrapped them in old newspaper and snapped a rubber band around them. While doing this, he said that his grandfather had come to Zanzibar in 1885. His whole family was here.

'We want to leave, but how?'

'You mean, go to India?'

'Not India. I have never been to India.'

'You mean America?'

'Yes. I want America.'

'Have you ever been there?'

'No.'

Over the next two days I bought supplies for the train trip south. It was impossible to be in Dar es Salaam and not meet foreigners attempting to solve Tanzania's problems. What struck me was the modest size of the efforts. No one was handing out large amounts of money anymore. This was mainly 'micro-finance,' a popular term for a popular activity. One American man I met was doling out loans of \$200 to \$500, to be repaid within a relatively short time.

'I say to them, "Don't think about another donor. We're going to get you on your feet. We're the last donor you will ever need."'

'Do you believe that?'

He laughed and said that Africans were 'grant-savvy.' They were so used to getting grants they were aware that the money would dry up

in three to five years, and assumed that they would have to look elsewhere for more money for their schemes: small-scale milk processing, retail shops, women's marketing projects.

'Maybe we're wasting our money, but it's not much money,' he said.

One day in a coffee shop I overheard an American preacher who was meeting some Africans, two men and two women, petitioning for grants of money. They said they needed the money soon. The preacher said that while they might be in a hurry he was not. The preacher was seventy perhaps, with bushy white eyebrows that gave him a severely owlish gaze.

'I am here to look at the situation,' he said. 'Yes, we have resources but they are coming to us through God's concern and God's love.'

One of the African men mentioned a school that needed cash right now.

The preacher bore down on him, saying, 'One thing we insist upon is, no government involvement at all.'

'Just guidance only,' the African man said.

'We take our guidance from the Bible.'

'Partnering,' one of the women said, just putting a word in, but winning when the preacher spoke up.

'We will consider partners but only faith-based partners, who share our principles,' he said.

The second woman mentioned money again.

'Submit your forms, so that I can study them,' the preacher said, and then after he told them what a very great privilege it was for him to interact with them, he led them in a solemn prayer, his head bowed. The Africans watched with pleading eyes, thinking (as I thought): We're never going to see this guy's money.

So many donors had been burned in Tanzania that grants were hard to come by – so people told me. Tanzanians might insist that the money was urgent, but donors could point out the visible fact that the enormous amounts that had been handed out in the past had done little good.

It was easier to leave. 'I want to go to South Africa,' a young man said to me in the market, prior to his unsuccessful attempt to beg

money from me. 'Many people I know have gone there. My friends just want to leave Tanzania. There is nothing here.'

'How do they get to South Africa?' I asked.

'The train from here to Zambia, then the bus.'

'How's the train?'

He made a face, wrinkled his nose, perhaps intending to discourage me. But I was not discouraged. I wanted to leave, too.